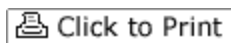


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Farm bill conferees lambaste press, administration

May 13, 2008 10:34 AM, By David Bennett
Farm Press Editorial Staff

On May 8, the farm bill still wasn't finished but was close enough that the main political players lined up to backslap and announce the latest provisions. Later, President Bush would dampen the mood by promising to veto the bill.

But before he did, the politicians stood in front of a blue board titled "Farm Bill: Investments for the Future" and took turns at the microphone. Smiling but defiant against suggestions they'd ignored calls for farm payment reform, the farm bill conferees were obviously exasperated that their message wasn't getting through.

"Last night, (I ran into) a bunch of guys from New York and New Jersey hanging out," said Minnesota Rep. Collin Peterson, House Agriculture Committee chairman. "I got to talking to them about the farm bill. After all this, some of those guys thought the entire \$300 billion in this bill went to farmers. That's the honest to God truth."

If the Bush administration has been the chief impediment to a new farm bill, Peterson then touched on the second: a press that's poorly educated on agriculture.

"The problem is we've got editorial writers still, to this day, writing that the whole \$300 billion goes to farmers. The truth is, out of the \$300 billion, something like \$36 or \$40 billion goes to farmers. The rest, the majority, goes to nutrition and conservation.

I implore my friends in the press to help us get people to understand just how this is structured."

"Hot off the press" numbers show "on the 10-year baseline, we're showing 73.5 percent of the spending in this bill goes to nutrition (up from 66 percent in the last farm bill); 16.1 percent goes to commodities, crop insurance and disaster (compared to 28.5 percent in the last farm bill). We improved conservation spending from 6.2 percent to 7 percent."

When the 2002 farm bill was passed, Congress received a lot of criticism from the press about spending too much money. "That same criticism will be (used) for this farm bill," acknowledged Georgia Sen. Saxby Chambliss. "But let me remind you of something before you're off to write about this: we saved well over \$20 billion in the commodity title of the 2002 farm bill. I suspect that with this farm bill we'll see significant savings also.

"We developed a very market-oriented process so our farmers and ranchers could achieve their income stream from the marketplace versus it coming from Washington. That's what they want and what we want.

"We made real reform in all the commodity titles, but none more significant than in payment limit provisions. We moved as far as we could towards the (Bush) administration on their request ... as we did on a number of other issues."

Chambliss, a Republican, has promised to try to override a White House veto. With other Republicans also taking such a stand, does President Bush have the votes to sustain a veto? It will be "very close" said Ed Schaefer, USDA secretary, during a May 9 press conference. Schaefer then played the populist and tied subsidy levels to U.S. families having trouble paying rising food prices. If politicians listen to such families "then we're going to sustain the veto."

North Dakota Sen. Kent Conrad insisted those claiming a lack of reforms in the new bill "haven't read it. This bill ends the triple entity rule. This bill requires the direct attribution of all farm program payments — no more paper entities. There must be a living, breathing recipient and we'll know exactly how much they got under exactly what programs."

In addition, there are dramatic changes in the income limits to qualify: "from \$2.5 million for a non-farmer down to \$500,000. For a farmer, after \$750,000 of income, there will be no direct payments."

Despite the conferees' attempts to preemptively handle farm subsidies and reform, the press wasn't dissuaded. After a handful of questions solely on those subjects, Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin had enough.

"Give us a break," said the Senate Agriculture Committee chairman. "All these people that were writing me letters about payment limits ... when they discovered last week that there'd be payment limits on conservation, all of the sudden payment limits weren't such a good idea.

"All the folks who have been writing and clamoring to put payment limits on farmers all of the sudden were organizing a protest because we were

going to put payment limits on their programs.

"So, we were going to apply the same payment limits to conservation that we applied to farmers. We had a revolt."

The non-farm payment limit for conservation is \$1 million. That includes a waiver that the USDA secretary can approve "if it's a project with special environmental benefits. If you're a non-farmer and two-thirds of your income is from farming ... there is no limit.

"That's what you need to write about. Is the glass half full or half empty?"

Prior to the new farm bill, the income cap on non-farm income was \$2.5 million. "We brought it down to \$500,000. (Bush) says it should be \$200,000 — we got closer to (his figure) than where we were. And on farm income there was no cap — none, zero. Now, the cap is \$750,000. Keep that in mind."

Peterson, known for blunt language, simply accused people of "ginning up" controversy with the new legislation. It's "bad for America" when some "write editorials that are bogus and putting out information that's completely false to an unsuspecting public in urban settings who have no clue what this is about. This has to stop."

Agendas are being driven and a lot of money spent to agitate against farm bill provisions, said Peterson. "Some of our friends that don't like what's going on now never complained when we were subsidizing corn and selling it below the cost of production for 20 years.

"Frankly, one of the big problems we have in this world is we sold food below the cost of production for 20 years. Now, we're having a big shock because it's going the other way. It would've been much better if ... food prices (had followed) what the cost of production was.

"Look at who is paying the people writing these stories and you'll figure out what's going on."

The situation "gets my dander up, too," said Harkin. "Studies done by universities and others that have no dog in this fight point out that the savings on gasoline is somewhere between 29 and 40 cents per gallon because of ethanol.

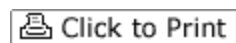
"Food is higher priced. Not because of ethanol but because of other energy inputs. Look what we're doing to keep the price of gasoline down. Take away that ethanol and watch the price of gasoline go sky-high. They aren't writing about that, are they?"

(For more, see <http://deltafarmpress.com/legislative/>)

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